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French crime fiction

‘The detection of crime is evidently not an art that has been cultivated in England.’ ‘Our Detective Police’, *Chambers Journal*, 1884.

It is not for nothing that Moriarty was otherwise known as the Napoleon of crime, that Poe’s Chevalier Dupin invented ratiocination from a comfortable armchair in a darkened room in Paris, or, for that matter, that Sherlock Holmes takes such pains to scoff at the French police, notably a certain detective named Lecoq, who, he claims, ‘was a miserable bungler’.¹ French contributions to the development of crime fiction, in particular the detective story, are significant in the sense that one cannot conceive of the developments in nineteenth-century English detective fiction without them. Holmes’s arrogance towards the continental police, notably the French, nevertheless bespeaks a certain amount of insecurity with regard to the fearsome reputation of the French police established during Fouché’s reign of terror under Napoleon, a reputation further consolidated throughout the nineteenth century.

The need to assert British supremacy in a matter so relatively trite as detective fiction has its roots in a tradition of political and cultural Anglo-French rivalry. For the English, in the wake of the Napoleonic wars, veritable Gallophobia reigned, with posters depicting John Bull quashing various manifestations of the French.² ‘France was the national enemy. Behaviourally, it was represented as a moral pit, a place of sexual adventure and infidelity, the paradise of atheists, a place of refuge for the bankrupt and the disgraced’.³

The English were also wary of French institutions such as the police system, making the first bobbies ‘a subject of almost universal obloquy, both as harbinger of French depotism and as a burden on rates’.⁴ The English Detective Police Department, created in 1842, was made up of poorly trained detectives whose failure to solve crime was much criticised by the press, anxious about soaring crime rates. Journalistic accounts of the efficient French police provocatively called for the department’s reform, along the lines of

the French model. However, French methods, though successful, were seen as despotic. A liberal democracy could not be seen to endorse a system of surveillance, trickery and disguise.

Hostility towards French policing methods was matched by anxiety about French culture generally, as it was represented in French literature. Condemnation of certain French novels was unrelenting: in the late nineteenth century Zola's novels were considered 'poisonous stuff',⁵ with translator and publisher Henry Vizetelly put on trial and imprisoned for their translation. But even earlier than this, the Parisian press and French writers were considered a contagious influence, as an 1836 review of contemporary French novelists sternly points out:

'It was not without considerable hesitation that we undertook to bring that mass of profligacy before the eyes of the British public. We feared that the very names now transcribed might seem to sully our paper. [. . .]

The habit of labelling *vials* or packets of POISON with that cautionary description may, though very rarely, have prompted or facilitated a murder or suicide – but how many ignorant and heedless persons has it not saved from destruction?'⁶

Needless to say, this kind of review – with its detailed plot summaries – could only succeed in whetting the British appetite for more.

Policing, surveillance and Memoirs

France, then, whose revolutions, coups and insurrections were bred by a dizzying succession of political regimes, was a country notorious for its policing, implementing the first police organisation in 1667. Rigorous police surveillance was considered indispensable and was both a means of keeping a check on citizens and a powerful tool in controlling political opposition. By the early nineteenth century a publishing trend whose success lay in the 'unveiling' of the secret machinations of the police created a context in which a criminal-turned-detective could earn fame and wealth through the publication of his life-story.

Eugène François Vidocq, a French brigand turned head of the Sûreté (the French criminal investigation department) published the story of his conversion in a series of best-selling memoirs in 1828. Caught one too many times, Vidocq was recruited as an informer, or *mouton*. His information proved to be so good that he was put to work for the detective police. He centralised the detective department, created a record system and remained Chief of Police from 1809 to 1827. The memoirs, full of accounts of his criminal days,

followed by equally lurid adventures detailing his activities as a policeman, where detective methods are limited to various acts of provocation, disguise, and incitement to betrayal, were instant best-sellers in France and in England. Vidocq's 'police methods' had little if any of the famous Cartesian spirit of rational inquiry that were epitomised in Poe's Chevalier Dupin less than two decades later. Vidocq succeeded in capturing the contemporary imagination primarily through his vigour, his adventures and, importantly, his early accounts of 'brigandage' which fed off an extant tradition of criminal memoirs,⁷ part of a popular publishing trend in which the exploits of pre-revolutionary French brigands were continuously re-issued, and where the outlaw's heroic status was often an index of popular discontent with the existing regime.

His is the first success story, injecting glamour, romance and adventure into the secret corridors of the *préfecture de police*, and Balzac, Hugo and others were much inspired by the 'French Police Hero'. Balzac, for instance, famously bases the character of Vautrin on Vidocq, in *Le Père Goriot* (1834), *Illusions Perdues* (1843) and *Splendeurs et Misères des Courtisanes* (1847). For the first time, a representative of the police was heroic and a source of literary inspiration. *The Westminster Review* declared him 'the most famous thief taker the world has ever known' and the *Literary Gazette* declared him 'the perfect hero'.⁸

The authenticity of Vidocq's memoirs, however, is to some extent debatable. The editor who bought the rights to the manuscript was doing so with the intention of serving the interests of the political opposition to Charles X. Vidocq's memoirs were supposed to reveal the extent of the tyranny and abuse exerted by the political police and in order to 'spice' up Vidocq's autobiography, the editor, Tenon, slyly suggested a 'reviseur'. The product was a manuscript which Vidocq claimed was far more 'immoral' than anything he had written, although he blamed this on the style of the writing rather than the content.⁹ His outrage, however, only served to reinforce the credibility of his conversion. Thereafter, various other ghostwritten volumes were published, the fourth of which Vidocq refused to sign. Many journalists exploited this opportunity, and Vidocq endlessly tried to rectify things, issuing his own accounts and persuading others to publish them as '*Les Vrais Mémoires . . .*',¹⁰ thereby ensuring the endless production and reproduction of the narrative of his life-story for an increasingly hooked readership.

The political ambiguity which characterises future fictional detectives derives in part from the fascination generated by accounts of Vidocq's careers on both sides of the law. Institutions that represent justice and the law are inevitably prone to error. Detectives who have experienced the 'criminal

underworld', understand the criminal mind better and are able to catch 'criminals' more successfully although, as a consequence of their previous experience, they remain, to a certain degree, isolated from the institutions they represent. Yet conversion can lead to a firmer belief in justice, thus detectives with either a criminal past or a developed sense of criminal complicity can be trusted to remedy any 'mistakes' made by the law. This takes the form of the detective ignoring a request that they cease their investigation, when they intuit that an innocent person has been accused. Such detectives thus seem on the one hand to uphold 'justice' outside or despite the system but, on the other, manage to convince the system that they are right, thereby ultimately consolidating its power.

Vidocq's memoirs are symptomatic of the public fascination with crime and the police, to which the numerous literary publications – both around his life-story, but also on other aspects of crime – testify. Part of this fascination derived from the increasing incidence of crime and its reporting. By the early nineteenth century, the population of Paris had doubled since the seventeenth century. The overcrowding of the city resulted in an increase not only in crime, but disease, against the spreading of which the Paris sewers were first constructed. Cemeteries, too, were overflowing, and the construction of the catacombs was devised as a means of dealing with extra corpses. The sewers and the catacombs became a literal and technological 'underground' by which means the city became in some senses, more accessible but also more vulnerable. The sewers, also used for the fast transport of letters in pneumatic tubes,¹¹ provided a network of circulation not just for waste or documents, but also for fugitives from the heavily policed streets. The catacombs, opened to the public since 1809, provided citizens with a spectacle of death beneath the city's surface which had its correspondence in the detailed crime-reporting that was going on in the city's newspapers, notably, in the *Gazette des Tribunaux*, founded in 1825, whose detailed descriptions of crimes and trials provided material for many a novelist.

Crime-reporting, already in some sense episodic – when covering the stages of a trial, for instance – was complemented by the increased demand for serialised fiction. Often solicited by editors anxious to increase circulation, works such as Balzac's *Une Ténébreuse Affaire* (serialised from 1843), based on Fouché's reign of terror, Eugène Sue's *Les Mystères de Paris* (1843) and Dumas's *Le Comte de Monte Cristo* (1844) – to name just a few – came to the public as series. Authors were highly paid and newspapers relied on their contribution as a guarantee of profitable circulation. It is in this publishing context that the author who invented the first novel-length detective protagonist came into his own.

Emile Gaboriau (1832–1873)

Emile Gaboriau, the first writer to dramatise full-scale police investigations and to make heroes of the detectives who lead them, provided the prototypes for three different kinds of fictional detectives: the eccentric amateur, Le Père Tabaret; the zealous and brilliant professional, Monsieur Lecoq; and the genius outsider, unnamed hero of Gaboriau's posthumously published work *Le Petit Vieux des Batignolles* (*The Little Old Man of Batignolles*) (1876).

Born in 1832, Gaboriau grew up in the Provinces, where he worked briefly as a notary whilst avidly reading the works of Fenimore Cooper, Ann Radcliffe and Edgar Allan Poe (who inspired him to write a series of imitations), before moving to Paris to become a writer. There he met and worked for Paul Féval, the sensation novelist, dramatist and publisher, as secretary and editor. During this period, he became well-versed in factual crime, attended numerous trials and studied French criminal law. In 1865, he wrote his first so-called 'roman judiciaire' (a name he devised with his editors), *L'Affaire Lerouge* (*The Lerouge Case*) (1865), serialised in the newspaper, *Le Soleil*, which brought him instant success. Gaboriau's work succeeded in revitalising the circulation of *Le Soleil*, and his name was consequently famous throughout France. In *The Lerouge Case* he implements an entirely original departure in French fiction: a detective, Le Père Tabaret, as protagonist. His subsequent novels, all equally successful and serialised, celebrate the acumen of a second detective, Monsieur Lecoq, a disciple of Le Père Tabaret. They include *Le Crime d'Orcival* (1866), *Le Dossier No. 113* (1867), *Les Esclaves de Paris* (1868), *Monsieur Lecoq* (1869), *La Vie Infernale* (1870), *La Corde au Cou* (1873) and *L'Argent des Autres* (1874). He also wrote plays and comic and ironic novels such as *Les Mariages d'Aventures* (1862) and *Les Gens du Bureau* (1862).

Gaboriau was quickly translated and widely read in England. The first official translation appeared in Boston in 1870 and in England in 1881, although pirated translations found their way across the Atlantic and thence to England before then. Gaboriau was evidently extremely popular, judging by the number of editions issued, and was also recommended reading for lawyers wishing for an overview of French judicial procedures.¹²

However, his fame was short-lived in the history of detective novels; nowadays he is referred to but only four of his works are still published. Many of his techniques were adopted and adapted, not least by Conan Doyle, who borrowed Gaboriau's method of inserting a long, detailed historical romance explicating characters' motives and histories in the middle of the investigation. Many of Holmes's techniques and characteristics can also be traced directly to Gaboriau's detectives.

In *The Lerouge Case*, Gaboriau's first detective, Le Père Tabaret, comes to a realisation of his 'vocation' towards the end of his life when he begins reading police memoirs:

'... I too can read; and I read all the books I bought, and I collected all I could find which related, no matter how little, to the police. Memoirs, reports, pamphlets, speeches, letters, novels – all were suited to me'.

He becomes fascinated by the 'mysterious power' emanating from the Rue Jérusalem, admires the 'artful' and 'penetrating detectives ... who follow crime on the trail, armed with the law, through the brushwood of legality, as relentlessly as the savages of Cooper pursue their enemies in the depth of the American forest', and is 'seized' by the desire to 'become a wheel of this admirable machine, – a small assistance in the punishment of crime and the triumph of innocence'.¹³

Tabaret's confession is a bookish one. His fascination with police memoirs mirrors the newly acquired tastes of the French reading public and yet it is a fascination which bizarrely combines the 'romance' of detection, and the heroic aspects of the chase, with a humble desire to serve 'this admirable machine'.

In *The Lerouge Case*, Tabaret uncovers a 'baby swap' plot that has gone awry and resulted in the murder of the nursemaid Claudine Lerouge. In this novel, Tabaret astounds the local police with his abilities and establishes himself as a detective proper. Nevertheless he is not infallible and allows his feelings to interfere with his judgement. He discovers that the young man he considers almost as a son, is, in fact, the murderer. His error is not fatal – though it provides an excuse for the inserted historical section – the wicked are punished and the good rewarded, whilst allowing the newly created fictional detective-hero to remain comfortably human. If *The Lerouge Case* is still tentative about its hero and his investigation, its success enabled Gaboriau to provide his readers with a second more forceful (because official) detective, Monsieur Lecoq.

Monsieur Lecoq, whose name echoes that of Vidocq (and foreshadows Sherlock), makes a marginal appearance in *The Lerouge Case*, where he is presented as an 'old offender', but is re-presented in *Monsieur Lecoq* as a poor but brilliant mathematician. In the novel bearing his name, and in *Le Crime D'Orcival*, he has become the detective in charge: the eccentric but terrifyingly efficient member of the police force. He proves himself a brilliant detective through his recognition that the common man believed to be the perpetrator of a gory crime in a seedy tavern in Paris is actually a duke goaded to the act through a long and dark history of passion, betrayal and blackmail. All the evidence, however, points against him, and the tale is

predominantly that of Lecoq's quest for proof of what he, and he alone, is certain of. Using inductive reasoning, subtle tracking techniques, outrageous disguises and original forensic methods, Lecoq combines Vidocq's sportsmanship and knowledge of the criminal world with Dupin's ratiocination. Although a part of the system, and ambitious for promotion, he works according to his instincts with all the passion and pride of an artist. Showing an awareness of the new technological aids that help the work of the criminal, Gaboriau endows his detective with foresight, creativity and open-mindedness with regard to new scientific methods for criminal investigation. However, his detectives have their foibles, amongst which is their tendency to fall in love.

In *Le Dossier No. 113* (*File No. 113*), Lecoq is hardly present at all, but it transpires that he has only taken on this case, in heaviest disguise, to revenge himself on a lover (Nina) who jilted him for another man. His pseudonym throughout the affair has been Caldas, and it is in the person of Verduret, an elderly bespectacled gentleman, that he helps to save Nina's lover, who is accused of stealing a large sum of money from the bank in which he works. In so doing, he uncovers an intricate history of love, fratricide, illegitimacy and blackmail. The novel ends with the revelation of Verduret/Caldas's true identity, and his motives:

'Then Caldas avenged himself in his own way. He made the woman who deserted him recognize his immense superiority over his rival. Weak, timid, and helpless, the rival was disgraced, and falling over the verge of a precipice, when the powerful hand of Caldas reached forth and saved him.

'You understand now, do you not? The woman is Nina, the rival is yourself; and Caldas is' – With a quick, dexterous movement, he threw off his wig and whiskers, and stood before them the real, intelligent, proud Lecoq.

'Caldas', cried Nina.

'No, not Caldas, not Verduret any longer: but Lecoq, the detective!'¹⁴

Lecoq emerges as 'the detective' from a veritable vaudeville show of personalities – the elderly avuncular figure, the jilted lover. The characters that have populated countless historical, sensational and romantic plots are replaced, in some sense, by the all-powerful detective who, without necessarily being the central character, authenticates the story. Yet in giving his true identity, Lecoq also thereby renounces the character of lover. In Gaboriau's last work, a new detective emerges, untrammelled by personal feelings, incited by the pure flame of the investigation itself.

Published posthumously in 1876, *The Little Old Man of Batignolles, A Chapter of a Detective's Memoirs* was probably written in the 1860s and is in many respects untypical of Gaboriau's works. For a start, it is a short

narrative. It also introduces an anonymous detective, a poor medical student who spends his time observing the mysterious comings and goings of his neighbour, Méchenet. This latter befriends him and takes him to a scene of crime thereby revealing his profession. He is a detective. The crime in question is murder. The body of an old man has been found, with the incriminating inscription of the letters ‘MONIS . . .’ in blood at his side, apparently written as he lay dying. The police claim that this is the clue that definitely identifies the murderer, as ‘Monis’ is the beginning of the name Monistique, the old man’s nephew and heir. The young medical student, however, finds himself quickly noting all kinds of details around the scene of the crime, in particular the fact that the bloody inscription has been written with the victim’s *left* hand, which strikes him as suspicious. This amongst other observations leads him to question the conclusions drawn by the police. As such, the practice of detection in this story is shown to require talent and inspiration: the plodding fact-gathering methods of the police need the injection of imaginative genius for justice to be dealt. The ‘newcomer’ detective himself leads the isolated life of an artist, and the criminal, in the last instance, is revealed as an *artiste manqué*.

Masquerading as an early memoir of a great detective, *The Little Old Man of Batignolles* thus demystifies the work of the professional police, whilst endowing the ‘real’ detective with genius of a kind. Although the status of professional detective is shown as marginal, that of the genius detective is even more so. He lacks experience and knowledge of the system and wishes to go straight after the culprit. In this episode he learns that this is impossible: the ‘system’ cannot function through idiosyncratic proofs, and must therefore be learned and mastered as efficiently as possible. This creates a further degree of difficulty, rendering the ultimate success of the detective more laudable still. The story itself, however, is slightly less straightforward than it first appears to be, and its resolution is remarkably tongue-in-cheek, giving the criminal some credit for his hitherto unapplauded ingenuity. The ‘genius’ newcomer initially noticed that the index finger of the *left* hand of the victim was stained with blood, proving that the murderer and not the victim had written the name with the intention of casting blame on Monistique. It is this observation that sets the two investigators on what turns out to be the right trail. However, when they do finally capture the culprit and explain their evidence to him, he is furious:

‘God! What it is like to be an artist!’ he shouted.

And looking at us with pity, he added: ‘Didn’t you know? M. Pigoreau was left-handed! And so an error in the investigation led to the discovery of the murderer.’¹⁵

The criminal, in this case, has proved to be too clever for his own good: the very detail with which he has planned the falsification of the evidence was the clue to his presence on the scene of the crime. 'To be an artist' in this case, is to have taken too much pride in a mediocre work. The killing of an old defenceless man is hardly a work of art, although the very fact that 'error' led to truth is a double-edged sword: it is the way crime ought to be solved and yet, in this case, reveals that the very process that enables its resolution is (pleasantly) fallible.

The 'error' in the investigation is about 'left-handedness' and writing. The story itself uses writing, the 'memoirs', as antidote to criminality, but the idea of not knowing which hand has been used lends a greater ambiguity to both the act of writing itself and the victim. To have been left-handed in the nineteenth century was also to have been backward, if not downright deviant.¹⁶ That the criminal alone shows knowledge of this, speaks of a kind of fraternity between himself and the victim. That is, in some senses, the victim himself is thereby encrypted in the codes of underworld, his death is not a cause for special grief and the murderer emerges as less wicked with his cleverness enhanced. He is angry that his brilliance has been overlooked and expresses no regret for his action. This lack of repentance is evident at the beginning of the narrative, where the narrator, in a preamble that introduces and justifies the writing of his memoirs, quotes the criminal's reaction upon his arrest:

'Ah! If I had only known the methods used by the police, and how impossible it is to escape from them, I would have remained an honest man!

It was these words which inspired me to write my memoirs.

'If I had only known . . .!'¹⁷

The criminal has no regret whatsoever for the criminal acts he has committed. The fictional inspiration for the memoirs is to scare off future law-breakers by letting them know how much more their adversaries know – know about them, that is, know about tracking them down, know about seeing them and catching them as they carry out 'war on society'. The phrase 'how impossible it is to escape from them' is ambivalent, as its sequel 'I would have remained an honest man' is a conditional, not a moral, preference.

The narrator then continues with the justification for his memoirs:

And I publish my recollections today in the hope, no I will go further, in the firm conviction that I have accomplished a highly moral task and one of exceptional value.

Is it not desirable to strip crime of her sinister poetry, to show her as she really is: cowardly, ignoble, abject and repulsive!

Is it not desirable to prove that the most wretched beings in the world are those madmen who have declared war on society?

That is what I claim to do.

There is an implicit problem, evidently, in crime's 'sinister poetry'. The phrase 'to strip crime of her sinister poetry' relates to one of the themes of this short narrative: the transferral of 'artistry' from the criminal to the detective. It also emphasises the ambiguous status of the criminal: the detective necessarily inherits or partakes of (if only in the unravelling) this 'sinister poetry'.

Gaboriau's remaining fragment, published after his early death at the age of forty-one, lost, found and re-issued, nicely brings together both the genres' origins and its future development. As a fictional detective memoir, masquerading as a kind of crime-prevention document, and as a narrative that has the power to outlive its author, it heralds a breed of super-detectives, Sherlock Holmes in particular, and of accompanying crimes and criminals that equally outlive their creators.

Although an amalgam of Poe and Gaboriau provided Conan Doyle with the basic recipe for his new detective, Sherlock Holmes's success goes beyond the mere combination of these influences. Conan Doyle's stories were rapidly translated and Holmes became an international by-word for the act of detection. The French too, took Holmes seriously, going so far as to implement his methods of identifying tobacco ash in their police laboratories in Lyons. Conan Doyle was also highly esteemed by Edmond Locard, one of France's top criminologists. He is nonetheless light-heartedly taken to task in subsequent French crime fiction, a friendly reminder that French detectives, and indeed their criminals, have lost none of their brilliance or flair.

Gaston Leroux (1868–1927)

First published in the newspaper *L'Illustration*, Gaston Leroux's novel, *Le Mystère de La Chambre Jaune* (*Mystery of the Yellow Chamber*) (1907), is a 'closed-room mystery' solved by the acumen of the Descartes-inspired investigative journalist Rouletabille. Leroux claimed that he wished to create 'something better' than both Poe and Conan Doyle.¹⁸

The perpetrator of the attempted murder of Mlle Strangerson, daughter of the famous scientist Professor Strangerson, turns out to be none other than one of France's most renowned detectives, Frederic Larson, who, in reality, is none other than the notorious criminal 'Ballmeyer'. The latter, secretly married to Mlle Strangerson in her youth, and still madly in love with her, seeks to prevent her marriage to Robert Darzac.

Narrated by Rouletabille's friend, Sinclair, a law student, who though not as obtuse as Watson, remains in the dark throughout the investigation, the 'mystery' is centred principally around how the assassin was able to leave the yellow chamber when it was locked from the inside and surrounded on the outside. As the plot unfolds, the highly competitive Rouletabille desires nothing more than to outdo the Parisian detective. His methodology is overtly Cartesian, and he claims that he will resolve the apparently inexplicable using pure reason. He disparages Larson's techniques, which, he claims, are entirely based on Conan Doyle.

A strong influence on Agatha Christie's country-house mysteries, the novel relies heavily on detailed reasoning that leads step-by-step from room to rooftop and is complete with floor-plans, diagrams and lists. Frequent references to Poe are made, yet the novel combines the latter's ratiocination with plenty of action: the killer strikes more than once, and is known to have access to the chateau's grounds, if not to actually inhabit them.

Professor Strangerson's scientific research, accomplished with the help of his daughter, concerns an investigation into 'the dissociation of matter'. The research, though never central to the narrative, nonetheless informs it. The assassin manages to escape twice, in a way that suggests either supernatural intervention, or the very subject-matter of the Professor's work. However, the Strangersons – as their name suggests – remain estranged from the novel's actual plot, which foregrounds the investigation led by the young, curiously infantile journalist, who, unlike other members of his profession, is bent on really finding out the truth of the affair. The truth of the 'affair' turns out to be more than he bargains for as it transpires that Larson and Mlle Strangerson are in fact Rouletabille's own parents. An Oedipal show-down with his father takes place in a following novel, *Le Parfum de la Dame en Noir* (*Perfume of the Lady in Black*) (1909).

The journalist, then, as fictional protagonist, is not only in some way the generator of crime in terms of reportage, that is, seeking out crime stories and embellishing them for newspapers to sell, but significantly its literary product: the scientist and the detective-bandit in the shape of Rouletabille's actual parents, as well as literary predecessors, produce a new breed of criminal investigator.

Maurice Leblanc (1864–1941)

The reversibility of the criminal element in Leroux's novel is well within the boundaries already established by the series written by his contemporary Maurice Leblanc, whose 'gentleman-cambrioleur', Arsène Lupin, first

appeared in 1904. Solicited by the publisher Pierre Laffite for his new journal '*Je Sais Tout*', Arsène Lupin fulfilled the request for a thoroughly French hero'.¹⁹

Created in the same light-hearted vein as Conan Doyle's brother-in-law E. W. Hornung's gentleman-thief, Raffles (in *The Amateur Cracksman*, 1899), Lupin is not, however, simply the French riposte to Sherlock Holmes, although he takes on and defeats a certain 'Herlock Sholmès'. Leblanc was apparently inspired by the real-life character Alexandre Jacob, an anarchist who financially supported his cause by robbery and who was arrested in 1903. The need for a new French hero was created not simply by a national competitiveness awoken by the international success of the new English super-detective, but also a desire to re-establish national pride: in ridiculing Kaiser Wilhelm II in one of his escapades, Lupin takes revenge for the French defeat in the 1870–1 Franco-Prussian war.²⁰ Lupin's charismatic exploits on the 'wrong' side of the law are necessarily informed by contemporary detective fiction, and though often creating puzzles for the indulgent but exasperated French police, Lupin sometimes finds himself – to his own amusement – helping them out. This occurs most notably in the novel *813* (1910), where a ruthless assassin ascribes a series of cold-blooded murders to Lupin, who is then honour-bound to clear his own name. Whereas Lupin might rob the rich, he would never kill, and the public adore him accordingly.

Elegant, refined, and brilliant, Lupin is the master of disguise and a formidable escape artist. Powerfully supported by his band of faithful followers, he effortlessly eludes the arm of the law, whilst occasionally suffering minor setbacks, notably, of course, in the realm of love. Unlike Robin Hood, he robs to make himself richer, although he occasionally helps those who have been made to suffer unjustly and provides a system of anonymous reparation when necessary. Prefiguring the far more sinister Fantômas, yet imitating the detectives who pursue him, Lupin appears and reappears in various guises. In 'Arsène Lupin Escapes' (1910), he succeeds in altering his physical appearance to the extent that the trusty Inspector Ganimard, described as 'almost as good' as Sherlock Holmes, claims that the man on trial is not actually Arsène Lupin, and thereby ensures his release.

Creating a super-criminal who is also a hero makes him less of a 'criminal'. In the wake of so much rigorous French policing, Lupin is a flamboyant reminder of flair, freedom and exquisite good taste, recalling his middle-class French readers to the possibilities of a more spirited sense of the Cartesian, and also, what might be called an inspired sense of free-market economy. Lupin increases his wealth through his intelligence, often thereby uncovering layers of hypocrisy and falseness. The rich that he robs are sometimes rich in appearance only and are discovered to have been themselves

cheating society – using fake bonds or replacing genuine gems with artificial stones, yet using these as guarantees in obtaining securities and loans. Thus, although he is a ‘gentleman-thief’, he fittingly represents the class he robs from.

Yet his gallantry, chivalry and, most importantly, his expertise in painting, antiques and jewellery, make him superior to most of his victims. If those he steals from are also revealed as criminals, and worse, hypocrites, then he also represents an equalising force, who, rather like Sherlock Holmes, doesn’t work to change the established order, but merely to remind its citizens of the old-fashioned prerequisites for belonging. ‘Real’ criminals are ruffians, and thus Arsène Lupin remains a bizarre contradiction: an aristocratic robber who nonetheless serves to remind readers of society’s fundamental inequalities.

If Arsène Lupin is a larger-than-life bandit hero, who gaily leaves his signature at the scene of the crime and constantly writes letters to the press, his successor on the criminal-as-protagonist front is chillingly recognisable precisely because he never leaves a calling card.

Pierre Souvestre (1874–1914) and Marcel Allain (1885–1970)

‘Fantômas.’

‘What did you say?’

‘I said: Fantômas.’

‘And what does that mean?’

‘Nothing. . . . Everything?’

‘But what is it?’

‘Nobody. . . And yet, yes, it is somebody!’

‘And what does that somebody do?’

‘Spreads terror!’²¹

Product of a frenetic literary collaboration between Pierre Souvestre and Marcel Allain, Fantômas, the amorphous criminal who is nobody, somebody and to some extent, everybody, came into being in February 1911, and appeared in thirty-two novels, a series which only came to an end with Souvestre’s death.

After the ‘charming’ adventures of Lupin, Fantômas comes to the public as a sinister and shocking incarnation of wickedness. The steady increase in unsolved crime is partly accounted for by his ubiquitous presence. He is obsessively pursued by the famous Inspector Juve, who has made him his personal enemy and has sworn to uncover his real identity and arrest him. Fantômas exists primarily because Juve believes in him, although in a final episode, the metaphoric interdependency of the criminal and the detective is made literal when the two are revealed to be brothers.

Fantômas, although regarded as a lawyer's joke, a figment of the detective's over-wrought imagination, a too simple device and scapegoat for any unexplained crime, embodies society's worst enemy. His presence everywhere remains, however, throughout the series, an absence. Since anyone is a potential suspect, no-one is entirely innocent; even Juve, at one point, becomes a likely candidate. However, it is Juve's quest for him and his methods of investigation that bind together the otherwise fragmentary episodes.

Fantômas is ruthless and kills mercilessly: decapitating aristocrats, dumping sleeping bodies on railway lines, blowing up entire ocean liners. Yet he would do anything for his lover, the beautiful Lady Beltham – he does actually murder her husband and stuff him in a trunk. As fitting mate to the Emperor of Crime she appears in several, mostly aristocratic, incarnations and would do, and does, anything for him. Appropriately, the lover of the most French of criminals is (or pretends to be) an English aristocrat.

If Lecoq, Lupin and Larson were masters of disguise, Fantômas is the genius of dissimulation, able to appear as the young and vigorous lover of Lady Beltham, the elderly father of Charles Rampert, an anonymous small-time employee and an eminent Professor of Psychology, Professor Swelding. At the end of the first series of adventures, Fantômas, in the guise of one Gurn, is arrested, tried and condemned to death. Lady Beltham arranges for a swap to take place between her lover and an actor who has gained fame impersonating him. Fantômas/Gurn's death is finally performed 'for real' by this actor, in front of a huge crowd of spectators. As such, the fake execution mirrors the insubstantiality and interchangeability that makes of Fantômas such an enduring character. As readers we suspect the actor of being Fantômas, until he is executed. And in fact, there is no reason that he couldn't have been, apart from our knowledge that 'Fantômas' always escapes. Only Juve, who notices that the man who is guillotined is not 'pale' from fear, but wearing a white mask of make-up, realises that Fantômas is still at large, thus enabling the continuation of the series. Fantômas exists primarily as 'mask' but one that cannot ever be removed, for indeed, there is no-one behind it.

Created on the eve of the First World War, Fantômas is a superlative criminal, a monster whose crimes perhaps, and their consumption by avid readers, are symptomatic of how in its representation, imagined evil defuses concern with real social and political problems, yet simultaneously foreshadows greater monstrosities to come.

In post-war crime fiction, that of the Belgian writer Simenon in particular, the criminal element is internalised, as it is in the 'hardboiled' school of American crime-writing. If Fantômas showed that he could be 'anyone', Simenon's novels reveal how anyone can be 'Fantômas'. The criminal is no

longer a hulking silhouette on the balcony, but is present in each individual to a greater or lesser degree.

Georges Simenon (1903–1989)

The Belgian writer who was one of the most prolific novelists of his time, who, it is claimed, made love to over 10,000 women and became a multi-millionaire, is most famous as the creator of the detective, Jules Maigret.

A powerful detective in the Parisian *Préfecture*, Maigret's origins are humble and his private pleasures are those of the *petit bourgeois*. Nonetheless, he dresses a tad more elegantly than his '*confrères*' and has his picture constantly in the press. Although he occupies a high position as *Commissaire de la Police*, he is often to be found investigating cases on the side, by accident, or against the wishes of highly-placed officials in the judicial system. He is recognisable for his physical corpulence (ironically '*maigre*' means thin'), his patience, his penchant for his pipe and his beer, and his paternal interest in and sympathy with 'his' criminals.

Simenon wrote seventy-five Maigret novels, although, like Conan Doyle, he tried to place his inspector into early retirement, in order to write 'serious' novels. The Maigret series derives its interest and popularity not so much from the process of logical induction or the complexities of plot, as from the psychological portraits of 'criminal' characters and the depiction of landscapes and settings which are often as bleak as the crimes they provide a backdrop for.

Simenon, like his Inspector, did not attend University, due to his father's financial situation – although he attended a series of lectures on forensic science at the University of Lieges whilst working as a reporter. His career as full-time journalist, commencing at the age of sixteen and providing the basis of economic and efficient writing techniques, ended shortly afterwards when he moved to Paris and began to earn a living writing pulp fiction and articles. Maigret came to him famously during an extended boat trip with his wife Tigy.

Had I drunk one, two or even three little glasses of schnapps and bitters? In any case after an hour, feeling rather sleepy, I began to see the powerful and imposing bulk of a gentleman emerging, who it seemed to me would make an acceptable detective inspector. During the course of the day I gave this character a number of accessories; a pipe, a bowler hat, a heavy overcoat with a velvet collar. And as my deserted barge was cold and damp, I furnished his office with an old cast-iron stove. . . . By noon the next day the first chapter of *Pietr-le-Letton* had been written.²²

Written in 1929 and published in 1931, *Pietr-le-Letton* (*The Strange Case of Peter the Lett*) is considered the first complete Maigret novel and in it are established many of the features which characterise the series. Maigret's need for warmth and 'fire' supersedes even the desire for drink as he unrelentingly tracks down a famous international criminal and avenges the death of his friend and colleague through a haze of rain and physical pain.

In contrast to his fictional predecessors, Maigret is far from flamboyant, deeply appreciative of his wife, whose fragrant stews are ever bubbling, and disparaging of 'logical' methods, preferring to use his intuition and instinct. He champions the underdog, uncovers hypocrisy, and is concerned above all to understand human motives.

For all the bourgeois values Maigret seems so comfortable with, he nonetheless, as Francis Lacassin points out, remains an anti-hero with something of the artist in him. His investigations are creative processes in which he subverts the traditional pattern of the criminal as father, where the criminal instigates the narrative act of investigation, and the detective as son is created in reaction to the criminal. He is or becomes, 'father' to his criminals and the act of understanding them reflects their creation as characters, mirroring Simenon's own authorial process.²³

Simenon, like Souvestre and Allain, Gaboriau and Leblanc, wrote at great speed, spewing forth novels at an astonishing rate and earning a great deal of money from them. His style, in contrast, is sparse and the scientific details of the investigation remain marginal to the plot. Where previous heroes leapt around either in pursuit or in escape, Maigret plants himself somewhere – usually visibly – and waits until his prey decides to make a move. Unlike Lecoq or Lupin and Rouletabille, Maigret is not ambitious (apart from having once wished to be a Doctor) and doesn't seek to impress or astound. He is grimly aware of social reality and refuses to vilify those who have 'wronged' society. Yet he uses severe interrogation techniques and psychological tricks on his suspects in order to obtain confessions, and this is something that has its antecedents in Lecoq's investigative methods, stemming from French judicial procedure where criminals are sometimes kept in solitary confinement and observed. Although with Maigret, the criminal-detective complicity reaches a finely-tuned peak, Maigret's sympathy never threatens his integrity.

Simenon kept writing the Maigret series throughout his literary career: the dogged pipe-smoking detective attracted a readership as devoted to his investigations as himself and Maigret's international popularity finally gave the Francophone world a detective (and not a criminal) whose fame is as enduring as that of Sherlock Holmes. Although his methods are deliberately

non-scientific, his relation to the criminal world is a function of the French context in which crime-writing first emerged and developed.

From its origins in Vidocq's memoirs, French crime fiction both demarcates and blurs the distinctions between those fleeing the law and those representing it. If, in nineteenth-century English detective stories, criminals are often foreign, the French, on the whole, proudly produce criminals from their own ranks, either converting these into super-star police heroes or allowing them to remain maverick characters in their own right. Celebrated outlaws, when created by a society that experienced revolution, embody a fight for freedom and for social justice. The ability to produce detectives who not only equal them, but who have to deal with complex bureaucratic procedures in order to arrest them, assures readers that whilst the reminder of heroic deeds beyond the pale of the law might occasionally benefit the nation, the nation is firmly if flexibly equipped to deal justice.

Although the English were wary of the repercussions not only of revolution, or French policing systems, but of the dangerous perusal of 'French novels', the widespread popularity of these series, in which criminals as well as detectives took centre-stage, are proof not only of their irresistibility – labels of 'POISON' notwithstanding – but also of a significant contribution towards the evolution of the genre.

NOTES

- 1 Arthur Conan Doyle, *A Study in Scarlet, The Complete Longer Stories* (London: John Murray, 1929), p. 23.
- 2 Jeannine Surel, 'John Bull', trans. Kathy Hodgkins, in Raphael Samuel, ed., *John Bull, The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity*, (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 10.
- 3 Samuel, ed., *John Bull*, pp. xxiv–xxv.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. xx. Policemen were nicknamed 'bobbies' after the founder of Britain's police system, Sir Robert Peel.
- 5 Patrick Brantlinger, 'The Case of the Poisonous Book: Mass Literacy as Threat in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction', *Victorian Review* 20 (Winter 1994), 119.
- 6 Anon., 'French Novels', *Quarterly Review*, 56 (1836), 65–6.
- 7 See Régis Messac, *Le Detective-Novel et l'Influence de la Pensée Scientifique* (Paris: Slatkine Reprints, 1975), p. 102.
- 8 Ian Ousby, *Bloodhounds of Heaven: The Detective in English Fiction From Godwin to Doyle* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 55.
- 9 Eugène François Vidocq, *Mémoires de Vidocq, Chef de la Police de Sûreté, jusqu'en 1827, aujourd'hui propriétaire et fabricant de papiers à Saint-Marché* (Paris: Tenon, 1828), pp. i–ii.
- 10 For full details see Eugène François Vidocq, *Les Vrais Mémoires de Vidocq présentés, annotés et commentés par Jean Savant* (Paris: Editions Corra, 1950).

- 11 Christopher Prendergast, 'Paris and the Nineteenth Century', *Writing the City* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 10.
- 12 Alfred E. Gathorne-Hardy, 'The Examination of Prisoners: Emile Gaboriau', *The National Review*, 3 July 1884, p. 593.
- 13 Emile Gaboriau, *The Lerouge Case* (1865; London: Vizetelly & Co., 1884), p. 24.
- 14 Emile Gaboriau, *File No. 113* (1867; London: George Routledge and Sons, 1887), pp. 189–90.
- 15 Emile Gaboriau, *The Little Old Man of Batignolles, A Chapter of a Detective's Memoirs*, (1876), in T. J. Hale, ed., *Great French Detective Stories* (London: The Bodley Head, 1983), p. 87.
- 16 Havelock Ellis, *The Criminal* (London: Walter Scott, 1890), p. 108.
- 17 Gaboriau, *Little Old Man of Batignolles*, p. 41.
- 18 Daniel Fondanèche, *Le Roman Policier, thèmes et études* (Paris: Ellipses, 2000), p. 31.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 29. 'Cambrioleur' means thief.
- 20 See *ibid.*, p. 29.
- 21 Marcel Allain, Pierre Souvestre, *Fantômas*, trans. Cranstoun Metcalfe (London, Stanley Paul & Co., 1915), p. 9.
- 22 Patrick Marnham, *The Man who wasn't Maigret, A Portrait of Georges Simenon* (London: Penguin, 1992), pp. 130–1.
- 23 Francis Lacassin, *Mythologie du Roman Policier* (Paris: Union Général d'Éditions, 1974), p. 173.